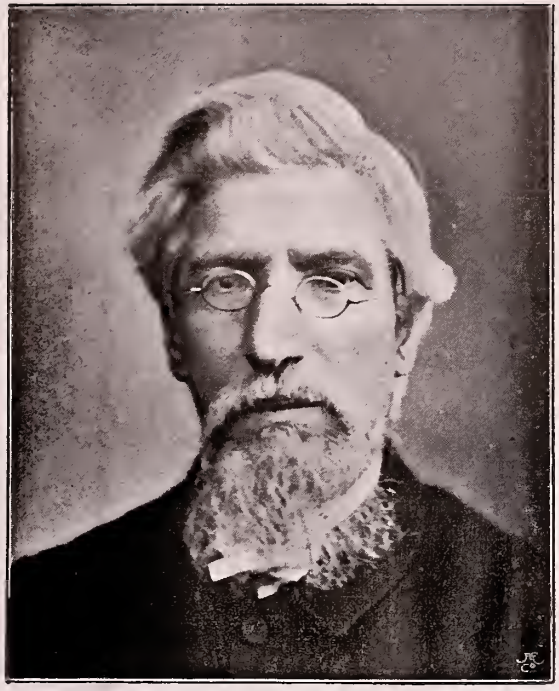

REV. GEORGE PIERCY.

A Veteran MISSIONARY'S EVIDENCE

AS TO

The Evils of Opium in China.

The following evidence was given in London, before the Royal Commission on Opium, on the 9th of September, 1893, by the Rev. George Piercy, formerly of the Wesleyan Mission, Canton, thirty-two years a Missionary in China.

HEADLEY BROS., ASHFORD, TYP.

A Veteran Missionary's Evidence.

Q.—(*Chairman*, Lord Brassey), You are, I believe, the founder of the Wesleyan Mission in China? *A.*—Yes.

Q.—Have you spent any considerable portion of time in China yourself? *A.*—I was 32 years connected with the Mission, from its foundation until the year 1882. Since that time I have been in London looking after the Chinamen who come here, so that I have been connected with the Chinese every month of every year since 1850.

Q.—In what parts of China did you reside? *A.*—At Canton and Hong Kong, in the South of China.

Q.—We shall be glad to hear what your personal impressions are with reference to the evils resulting from the use of opium among the better class of the Chinese? *A.*—I may say, my Lord, that I have heard the evidence that has been given here, yesterday and this morning, the whole of it.* Still there are two points that I should like to lay before the Commission which have not been touched upon, I think, at all. I wish to be as brief as possible, and yet wish to give emphasis to those two special points.

The Ruin of the Hong Merchants.

The first is a short account of a body of merchants in China, in Canton, who existed under the old *regime* as a very important class of men. There was a time, when Canton was the only port open to Western commerce in China. During that time there was a body of merchants in Canton upon whom the Chinese Government devolved the responsibility of the conduct of all the trade, giving them

* Evidence had been given by Missionaries having experience in various parts of China as to the terrible injury inflicted by Opium.

the monopoly of importation and exportation. These were termed in those days the Hong Merchants. The number was from 12—varying no doubt at different times—from 12 to 18 or 20. In China, the rulers, the official class, is the highest, and with them comes the scholarly class of the Chinese; but in Canton we had what I do not think has ever existed since in any of the ports of China, and what cannot exist again—there was a body of merchants who conducted the whole of the trade between outside nations and China. I wish to say respecting that body of merchants that they were princely men, the wealthiest of the commercial class in China. They were in numbers nearer 20 houses than 10; and they were men who, according to Chinese customs, had large families. Polygamy is an institution in China, and they were men with large families. Now the families of this Cohong, as I term them, being among the wealthiest in China, would be recognised by Englishmen as being in the category of men in eminent position; and their families in some respects the most respectable and most influential that existed. What I have to state about them is this: that only two families of them survive to the present time. Those two families were called respectively Puntingkwa and Howkwa. The other merchants had somewhat similar names, their family names, or names of their firms. But what I wish to bring before the Commission is this: that of these large families, consisting, some 50 years ago, of many sons and of a host of grandsons—all those families, with the exception of one, are all but extinct; or reduced to extreme poverty and distress. The hoards of wealth which their fathers gathered when they held that monopoly, and the property they acquired, the gardens of pleasure and their palatial residences, all these have gone to wreck and ruin, and there is only the one family of Howkwa left in Canton of those 16 or 18 Hong merchants. That name may be remembered somewhat in England by a certain blend of tea in the old time that was called "Howkwa's mixture." This, I have no doubt, the ladies appreciated. Now here is a case in point in which there was great wealth, high respectability, good position in society, and in which that wealth was bequeathed to sons and to grandchildren; yet it has almost entirely disappeared, and disappeared because the sons and the grandsons took opium in large quantities, beginning, of course, with small doses when smoking it, and going on to larger doses, until in some of those families a man was kept to prepare the opium for

A CHINESE MERCHANT.

smoking—to bring it from its raw condition by repeated processes into the state of prepared opium for smoking purposes; and this went on until at last these families have been entirely ruined. This seemed to me, so far as I have known and so far as I have learned also of the results of the mischief that opium has done in China, to be a most prominent example of the evils wrought among a body of people who were exceedingly well-to-do, and who were also well trained and scholarly to a certain degree.

Q.—And the example which you quote includes a very considerable number of individuals? *A.*—Yes, my Lord, more than a hundred. A great many more than a hundred.

Q.—And among that total number you would only name one who has been able to resist this course of degradation? *A.*—Only one family. The other house that I named was Puntingkwa's. That family owned large and extensive gardens in the western suburbs of Canton, and for many, many years during my residence in China those gardens were visited by foreigners, by missionary families, and by many wealthy Chinese as beautiful pleasure grounds. Within the last 20 years those gardens have been sold, the buildings have been pulled

down, and, in connection with other extensive house property in the western suburbs of Canton, all has been scattered to the winds. I myself know of no case in China in which there is so significant a proof of the mischief wrought by opium smoking.

Q.—And you connect all this which has happened with the loss of energy and with the loss of ability arising out of the consumption in excess of opium? *A.*—Yes, my Lord; and there are numbers of other gentlemen, some who are in this country and some who are in China, who could speak to the very letter as to the truth of that to which I have referred—that the sons of these families, with the rare exception of perhaps one or two, were all useless, and became more or less abandoned, owing to this evil habit, and their property was entirely scattered as the years rolled by.

Q. (Sir J. Lyall.)—Whenever a commercial monopoly like that for a time gives a certain number of families an enormous advantage over the rest of the public, and raises them to a great wealth and then is suddenly broken up as this monopoly was, I believe that the state of those families is apt to decay and to fall into that sort of condition that you describe, although, no doubt, opium was also a very great cause. But I have seen exactly the same thing in other parts of the world, where a family had possessed a monopoly for a certain time and became through that monopoly very wealthy, and when suddenly that monopoly was broken down, they proved unable to support themselves or to carry on industry in an open market? *A.*—I can quite readily believe that; in fact, I have some knowledge of great riches, especially when suddenly acquired, almost as suddenly disappearing; but the statements which came to our ears from time to time, and the results which we actually saw ourselves were such relative to the enormous consumption of opium in those families—went to show that they were ruined entirely by the consumption of opium.

Q. (Chairman).—While you recognise the possible operation of those other influences and the change of circumstances to which Sir James Lyall has alluded, you remain of opinion that in the case of those families to whom you were referring the personal degradation and the personal incapacity of those concerned arising out of the opium habit was the principal cause of their destruction? *A.*—That

is my own full conviction; and it was also the conviction of all the intelligent friends that I had for many years in Canton.

Degradation of the Common People.

Q.—Now what have you known of the use of opium and of its effects among the masses in China? *A.*—Most of my life was spent in the city of Canton, but the last two years that I was in China I was resident in a large town, 12 miles from Canton, of the name of Fatshàn. In China we only give the name "city" to walled cities; this is an unwalled town, but with 400,000 inhabitants. It was an immense place, and we were residing in the outskirts of it. Now in speaking with some of my Christian friends there about opium, I said to one of the most intelligent among them: "You ought to give us more information about opium than you do;" and he said, "But you hardly dare to examine into the great evil it is doing in China, and doing in this place." I said, "I think we dare do it. What is there that we do not know yet that you can make known to us?" "Well," he said, "I can take you to a place in the heart of this great town where you would see opium and the mischief it is working, and especially the stimulus that it is giving to other vices." I replied, "I am ready to go there whenever you will take me." But as soon as I expressed my willingness to go with him, then he seemed desirous to back out, and began to say that it would be very dangerous, in fact, that it would perhaps be at the risk of some broken limb, or even of our lives if we visited the place. I said to him, "But you have said that we don't know, and are afraid to examine into the full extent of this evil. Now, for one, I am not afraid, and if you will take me, I will go." So he took me. On our way he informed me, that it was a number of buildings surrounding an open square; on the one side were opium houses—large places—and on another side there were gambling houses, and that it was especially from the gambling houses that he feared difficulties. Then at another side of the square there were brothels, and he said: "I am taking you when in all probability there will be less danger than at any other time—certainly much less danger than in the evening or at night. Where I am taking you, you will see the extent of these opium houses, and some of the people that are in them, but many more will be there at night; you

will also see the exterior of the other places." We looked through a series of buildings where there was every arrangement for opium smoking, and where I have no doubt that 300 or 400 persons could be accommodated day after day, and night after night, to smoke opium. The other buildings of course I did not go into. Into one it would have been improper for me to have gone, and into the other it was hardly worth risking it. I had seen numbers both of small gambling places and innumerable houses in Fatshàn where opium is smoked, but these were on a much larger scale. We came away, and my friend was exceedingly glad when we got home without any danger whatever. That incident impressed me more fully than almost everything which I had seen in China as to the evils of opium. In that place there would be from 200 to 400 or 500 men assembled—smoking opium. From this place they went to the other places. I don't say that no other persons went to the other places, but I say that here there was a focus of evil; and as we recognise in this country that the public-house and the intoxicating glass are provocatives, and the source of many evils, and lead to a great deal of work in the police-courts and gaols, and houses of correction, so I found there on a scale that I had not seen in any other place what seemed to me to be the strongest proof which I have had of the mischief that opium smoking was doing among the *lower classes* of the population. That is all I need to say on that point.

No Exaggeration Whatever.

I will add one word, if you will permit me, my Lord: it is this, that whereas occasionally speakers against opium, and anti-opium agitators, as they have been called, have been spoken of as exaggerating, as immensely exaggerating, the evils of the trade and the evils of smoking in China; just allow me, my Lord, to say I believe that it is entirely impossible to exaggerate these evils. I believe it is possible to make great mistakes when we give figures. When we come to state numbers I think we can be wide of the mark, but as to the total amount of evil done to the opium smoker himself, and the evils which flow from his wrong-doing, to his family, to his relatives, and to his friends, I think, a Commission sitting in all the leading cities of China would fail in summing up the total of the mischief and ruin and death that is wrought by opium in China I believe, from this point of view

that there can be no exaggeration whatever. It is beyond the powers of one, or of one hundred men to gather together, to tabulate, and to fully estimate the evils that are wrought in China by opium.

Chairman.—You have summed up the results of all your experience in China in that concise and powerful statement, which of course will have very great weight with the Commission, and I do not know that I can press you to go into details. You have given us, in a comprehensive view, your impression. The Commission is much obliged to you.

Q. (Mr. Pease).—You have said that you have listened to all the evidence that has been given, but you wished rather to enforce these two statements; may we understand that you generally approve of the evidence that has been given? *A.*—Yes, but I have studiously avoided taking up points which have been brought up before.

Q. (Chairman).—We are very much obliged to you for your consideration of the necessity of moving forward. *A.*—I wish, however, to be permitted to state that almost entirely I agree with the evidence which was given yesterday and this morning.* In many points, if necessary, I could corroborate and strengthen that evidence, but I do not consider myself that it is necessary to do so. Those two particular points have been in my mind since I have been before the Commission, and I challenge any man to overturn the evidence now given as to the entire ruin of the Hong merchants in Canton, and in regard to the other matter also.

[*The above is extracted from the Report of the Royal Commission on Opium, presented to Parliament, vol. I., pp.* 35, 36.]

Issued by the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, Finsbury House, Blomfield Street, London, E.C.

July, 1896.

Price—One Half-penny.

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* See Note at Page 2.